The Driver's Seat: Undoing Character, Becoming Legend

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> I now realized that I had been elected to the job [of editing the *Poetry Review*] on the assumption that I could be manipulated, whereas I took up the position that if you are in the driver's seat, you drive.[1]

What is Muriel Spark driving at? *The Driver's Seat* has been described variously as an 'absurdist' or 'Christian' parable;[2] a 'macabre melodrama';[3] a 'vision of evil';[4] a 'stud[y] on the art of fiction itself';[5] a 'compendium' of modernist techniques;[6] a parody of postmodernism;[7] 'a presentation of the unpresentable';[8] a study of 'urban psychosis',[9] or 'alienation';[10] a hysterical text;[11] and of course by Spark herself as 'a study […] in self-destruction',[12] her most poetic novel,[13] 'creepiest' and 'best'.[14] In a sense, then, *The Driver's Seat* is *la crème de la crème*, and like that famous Sparkian phrase, it both exposes and celebrates the presumptuousness and affectation that lie behind the creation of character. Here is how the text defines itself, in what may have once been called a typical postmodern gesture: having tracked her prospective killer to his hotel, Lise, still holding her man, turns at the door and calls back,

> 'You can keep his luggage. You can have the book as well; it's a whydunnit in q-sharp major and it has a message: never talk to the sort of girls that you wouldn't leave lying about in your drawing-room for the servants to pick up.' She leads her man towards the door.[15]

This is Lise's take on the story, her story. In a self-referential moment, or a metafictional move, she steps out of the book to pass it on to the next reader. This simple gesture throws up a number of evocative clues: that she is but a reader of the book of her life (or rather death), which in turn suggests that someone else is the writer, unless of course this is an autobiography; that she does things or lives 'by the book'; that as a 'whydunnit' rather than a 'whodunnit', the book is concerned with the motives for the crime rather than the crime itself.

Tantalisingly, then, what seems at first glance a generous gesture of 'giving away' what's in the book (the 'why' of the 'dunnit'), all we as readers are left with is very much a closed book, a book that she has been holding closed all along, that we are teased into reading and re-reading in order to find out the answer to the mystery. 'My lips are sealed', in other words; or to put it in terms of what Jonathan Kemp calls the novel's 'recognizable trope' of unspeakability,[16] her lips are parted but not to reveal:

> She walks along the broad street, scanning the windows for the dress she needs, the necessary dress. Her lips are slightly parted; she, whose lips are usually pressed together with the daily disapprovals of the accountants' office where she has worked continually, except for the months of illness, since she was eighteen, that is to say, for sixteen years and some months. Her lips, when she does not speak or eat, are normally pressed together like the ruled line of a balance sheet, marked straight with her old-fashioned lipstick, a final and a judging mouth, a precision instrument, a detail-warden of a mouth; […] 'I'm going to have it,' she said. 'I'm going to have the time of my life,' and she had

> looked at the two men and five girls under her, and at her quivering superior, one by one, with her lips straight as a line which could cancel them all out completely.[17]

We are handed both an open and a closed book, then: open because quite literally in order for us to be reading these lines, the book (*The Driver's Seat*) is open, and closed because metaphorically at least the book still contains a mystery, the unanswerable 'whydunnit'. To reinforce further the self-reflexive, performative aspect of the narrative, one also sees here Lise luring the reader, in one prolonged demonstration of woman as tease. The active role she plays at this juncture, leading (on) her (leading) man, handing over his belongings and the book she has been holding as the answer to the riddle that she has posed to the reader so far, suggests agency and control. The moral of the story too that she summarises for the (prospective) reader forces an interpretative frame into being: 'never talk to the sort of girls that you wouldn't leave lying about in your drawing-room for the servants to pick up'.[18] In other words, this is a cautionary tale, arguably aimed specifically at the male reader. Interestingly, this note of caution, delivered in a didactic, moralising tone by Lise's 'judging, […] detail-warden of a mouth'[19] suggests that the victim of the crime in this particular 'whydunnit' is the man, not the woman. Lise profiles the perpetrator as relentlessly as he might groom a victim. Indeed, he sees her coming a mile off. Here, Lise seems to pull rank: boys, be careful; act but be prepared to face the consequences of your actions; or indeed, be afraid, be very afraid. Issuing 'thou shalt nots', like a feminist avenger, a gender warrior or sex terrorist, Lise you could say flies the flag of feminine resistance. Or does she?

Let's examine this idea for a moment: to begin with we have the deeply troubling notion of an act of feminist justice that entails the snaring of an unwilling, unwitting aggressor in the execution of a sacrifice. Woman as temptress lures male victim towards the fulfilment of the intractable destiny of her violation and death: what else is this but the acting out of the most brutal of anti-feminist clichés? The text articulates this pernicious logic quite brazenly:

> 'A lot of women get killed in the park', he says leaning back; he is calmer now.
> 'Yes, of course. It's because they want to be.' […]
> 'A lot of women get killed,' he says.
> 'Yes, I know, they look for it.'[20]

Lise as *femme fatale*, 'belle dame sans merci', fearless harridan, a bearer of doom, confirms the desire to kill and be killed that underlies (as a kind of primal scene) the encounter between the male and female. Yet the part is ill-fitting. Here is no 'thanato-erotic anxiety',[21] or sign of a libidinal investment, despite the title's near-Freudian rubric of a 'drive'. The deadly scene is being set, however, and Lise's starring role in it does imply a fraught dynamic, or even deep complicity rooted in the acknowledgement of its outcome. For feminist critics, one would expect, the very premise of that prior knowledge is problematic; Elaine Showalter, for instance, has argued to that effect:

> Women's novels are testing the limits of the liberated will and the metaphysics of violence. What are the irrational forces of evil and violence that collide with

> control of one's life? Are they outside the self, in male society? Or are they also within the self, in fantasy, guilt, and hate? The phantom killer is obviously a monitory figure; he may also be a projection of female violence, the extreme form of an anger women have only recently begun to imagine and explore.[22]

The issue becomes even more fraught if one dwells further on the matter of whether Lise was raped or not. On paper, as one might say, Spark's text records that Lise is intent on being killed, that quite literally she *asks for it*. But there is more to this insight than the frisson of Spark's witty, wicked literalism and it hinges on the question of rape as a turn of events: was that the only possible outcome, albeit unforeseen (or at least undesired) by Lise? On paper again, Lise's protest ('"I don't want any sex", she shouts. "You can have it afterwards"'),[23] suggests necrophilia as an alternative option, but to no avail. Or is her protesting in fact the cue to a predictable twist in a predictable plot, over which she maintains control to the last? In a sense the only way she can technically be said to have been raped is if she resists the sexual violation. The fact that she picks a convicted sexual 'maniac' and not any ordinary man (though all men in the book are shown to have that potential, hence her toying with the idea that they might be 'the one'),[24] suggests that this is an important element, a desirable character trait, or an essential skill, requisite experience on which to base her choice of 'Mr Right', the man for the job. According to this logic, the only way to ensure that she does get raped (and that he is accused of that crime too) is to refuse sex, which apparently, vocally she does. But can we be sure that Lise, having supposedly plotted the act in such meticulous detail and with such chilling conviction, did not dissemble at the point of resistance? Put differently: if Lise planned to be

raped, how would she go about it? Scarily, magnificently, Spark here turns the horrific logic of misogyny inside out: the standard line of defense implies that a woman 'asks for it' by saying 'no' ('no' means 'yes', etc.), and that's what Lise does. She instructs the male novice how to kill her and says 'no' to sex with a stranger she has willingly brought to a secluded spot in the park, a performance which in the context of any law court or tabloid newspaper, is tantamount to 'asking for it'.

This may be a perverse reading of a text that asks perverse questions, and its terrible logic compels the reader to resist it. Even Spark's critics, to a man and woman, are loathe to follow Spark down the (city garden) path of personal and political taboo. In that sense, Lise's project has to be seen to fail,[25] her 'best laid schem[e] gang[ed] agley', as Robert Burns might put it.[26] Still, if willing oneself to be killed by a well-chosen stranger may be explained away partly as an arcane, overelaborate form of suicide, or the logical conclusion to a life overtaken by pathology or paranoia, or indeed a mystical act of private devotion to some inscrutable god or goddess,[27] a woman's full consent to the sexual act seems always to be inflected with doubt in Spark's writing.[28] Consider, for instance, the following little proleptic echo from one of Spark's early novels, *The Girls of Slender Means*. Dorothy, a pretty girl about town and one of the female boarders in the novel,

> could emit, at any hour of the day or night, a waterfall of débutante chatter, which rightly gave the impression that on any occasion between talking, eating and sleeping, she did not think, except in terms of these phrase-ripples of hers: 'Filthy lunch'. 'The most gorgeous wedding'. '*He actually raped her, she was amazed*'. 'Ghastly film'. 'I'm desperately well, thanks, how are you?'[29]

This deceptively throwaway, random rendition of female experience crystallises in a typically ambivalent way Spark's deep concern and finely tuned ear for the unnerving power of language to betray knowledge even without agency; it also allows a glimpse at the equally unnerving gap between experience and reflection, a gap which offers plenty of opportunities for acts of casual violence against women, of the physical, emotional and intellectual kind.[30] The moral and emotional disconnect apparent in Dorothy's girly 'phrase-ripples' suggests that a woman's point of view might on occasion amount to an 'out of body' experience, though it is not clear whether that would be a defense mechanism forced on women by a socially sanctioned misogynist treatment or a fundamental ability to stand outside the body and the social, as a kind of witness to mere fact. (As Winston Churchill, another resonant voice in the novel, once put it: 'You must look at facts, because they look at you').[31] At such moments, Spark seems both to flesh out and empty clichés of meaning. It could be argued that the attendant implications for notions of responsibility, consent, agency, or indeed the very real possibility of systematic, predictable violence against women, are far more serious and complex than Spark's witty takes on cliché might seem to invoke, but her unique perception and recording of them as paratactic instances of more often than not casual, rather than causal, actions is no less compelling.

Spark's writing is riddled with such moments of linguistic ingenuity and ambiguity, and it is to these I turn now for a further reflection on the enigma that Lise poses. In the same way that Dorothy is heard to 'emit' her 'débutante chatter', like a charming but slightly uncanny wind-up doll, Lise's language too often produces estranging effects. '"You look like Red Riding-Hood's grandmother"', she says to the stranger Bill, the macrobiotics freak, as she sits next to him on the plane; '"Do you want to eat me up?"'[32] It turns out he does, of course, but the expression is still

unsettlingly strange, though all too Sparkian in its idiosyncratic, self-contained logic; in both setting and rationale (though in a different register), for instance, it echoes Robinson's female *ingenue* account in another of her early novels:

> I had taken rather a liking to Jimmie on the Lisbon plane […] I had taken to Jimmie […] because of his seeming unpremeditation in talking to me in the first place […] I find that, when travelling abroad alone, it is wise and actually discreet to take up with one well-chosen man on the journey. Otherwise, one is likely to be approached by numerous chance pesterers all along the line. One must, of course, discriminate, but it is a thing one learns by experience, how to know the sort of man who is not likely to press for further commitments. I felt I was lucky to meet with Jimmie. In fact, I had more or less picked on him at the airport, out of a need for protection from a broad-faced English commercial man with a loud voice and a lot of luggage who had been looking much my way.[33]

Back in the *Driver's Seat*, when Lise hands over the tell-all book to the hotel porter, her description sounds both knowing and ridiculous: 'it's a whydunnit in q-sharp major'. The literary critic/reader could (at a stretch) hear an allusion to Marguerite Duras's hugely popular 1958 novella *Moderato Cantabile* in its references to Anton Diabelli's Sonatina in F major, and given Spark's stated interest in the *nouveau roman*, this might well be a playful nod at a fellow woman writer with not dissimilar preoccupations.[34] But Lise's 'q-sharp major' is an imaginary scale. She's slightly off-key again in the passage quoted above when she confirms Richard's thought that 'a lot of women get killed', by explaining that 'they look for it'. What does that actually

mean? Is this a case of literary precision, where the reader is to assume that having to speak English with her killer-to-be (it is not stated but is the most plausible scenario), Lise, as a non-native speaker, gets the idiomatic phrase ('they ask for it') slightly wrong? Or is it this an example of Lise's idiolect, a unique formulation expressing a unique vision of the world? In that case, what exactly does the 'it' refer to? 'Death', 'trouble', 'the time of their lives', their prime? The ending that will confirm their existence? Is Lise's inscrutable uniqueness, or, as the reader might be led to suspect, probable insanity speaking here? The overarching doubt about Lise's competence and therefore her agency and responsibility is implicit in this line of questioning. But, like other such instances in the text, this seems to be a false clue, the wrong question to ask, or more to the point, what a psychiatrist, a journalist, a lawyer or a policeman would be expected to worry about. Their 'evidence', gathered from amongst fragments and impressions, overheard and mis- or overinterpreted clues would amount to whatever coherent narrative would best suit the purposes of the institution which requires such signposting. In Spark's work, these narratives are as reliable or valid as the many self-serving and false witnesses who provide those clues in the first place (the Mrs Fiedkes, Carlos and Bills of this world, as well as the sales assistants, the Swedish tourists, the traffic policemen, morbid and moribund aristocrats and Sheiks).

Spark pours contempt on those attempting to explain away people's behaviour by prying into the mind. So called 'mental specialists' bear the brunt of her ridicule, usually for their impertinence or sheer human incompetence (or both). Examples abound: the spooky Dr Jarvis, who attempts to treat Freddy Hamilton in *The Mandelbaum Gate*:

> ‘Oh, all right, I’m willing to be diagnosed,’ Freddy said. ‘I’ll go as far as that. But I won’t necessarily accept their diagnosis, or act on it, or answer their probing questions. Probing questions are plain bad manners to me, and that’s the long and the short of it. […]. No one should submit their mind to another mind.’[35]

Or the in-house therapist treating Paul’s wife in *The Hothouse by the East River*: ‘“Garven is getting me down. A psychoanalyst working in my house as a butler. He’s determined to document her case history. Our lives will be an open book”’;[36] and the pointless psychiatrist in Spark’s stage play, *Doctors of Philosophy*, a liaison with whom Annie knowingly advises against: ‘“Let me see. You mustn’t, of course, go near a psychiatrist, unless you were thinking of eloping with him. But they aren’t satisfactory. One can’t lean on them when it comes to the leaning point”’.[37] And, finally, in *Aiding and Abetting*, worst, or perhaps best, of all, there is Dr Hildegard Wolf, the most sought-after psychiatrist in Paris, whose unique method consists of talking about herself, though never about her past life as ‘Beate Pappenheim’, the fake stigmatic of Munich.

Likewise in *Symposium*, journalists get it too, susceptible as they are to any formulaic interpretation:

> It was so far only a sketch, stretching along one side of the refectory wall. It depicted a long, huge, antiquated monster, blowing clouds of smoke. ‘Is that a dragon?’ said [the journalist] Miss Jones, avid for symbolism.
>
> ‘No, it’s the sketch of a train. A steam train,’ said Sister Lorne loud and clear.

> ‘Oh, a train,’ said Miss Jones. ‘Would that be Freudian?’
>
> ‘Freudian my arse,’ said Sister Marrow in a booming voice from the doorway.[38]

And finally, there’s the kind of probing that policemen do, though in the most banal and unthinking way (that’s when they’re not being asked to shoot people in the street, as Lise seems to invite the traffic cop to do):

> He runs to the car, taking his chance and knowing that he will at last be taken, and seeing already as he drives away from the Pavilion and away, the sad little office where the police clank in and out and the typewriter ticks out his unnerving statement: ‘She told me to kill her and I killed her. She spoke in many languages but she was telling me to kill her all the time. She told me precisely what to do. I was hoping to start a new life’. He sees already the gleaming buttons of the policemen’s uniforms, hears the cold and the confiding, the hot and the barking voices, sees already the holsters and epaulets and all those trappings devised to protect them from the indecent exposure of fear and pity, pity and fear.[39]

And here, at the end, after the deed is done, we realise what we should have suspected from the beginning, namely that we will never know ‘the whole truth’, never find out, other than what’s pieced together in a misheard, misunderstood, badly translated, irrelevant or indeed over-interpreted way, what really drove them to it. As the text itself asks hauntingly early on, in anticipation of events at once meaningful and meaningless:

> Lise is lifting the corners of her carefully packed things, as if in absent-minded accompaniment to some thought, who knows what? […] She puts the bunch of keys in her hand-bag, picks up her paperback book and goes out, locking the door behind her. Who knows her thoughts? Who can tell?[40]

The non-clues embedded in the passage – carefully packed things lifted absent-mindedly, the keys and book – underscore the motif of pointless detail, arranged in arcane order for a near cinematic close up that exposes little more than the reader's (or spectator's) voyeuristic need to piece together the story as it unfolds. If there is a genuine clue, it is perhaps the care with which Lise proceeds, as if always mindful of what could go wrong in the execution of dramatic action. As Judith Roof puts it, '[t]he question is not what Lise will know but how […] Sorting around with a level of uncertainty about details […] Lise is anxious that the events of her life comply with a story she already knows'.[41]

For the reader, as the final lines of the text suggest, no full exposure is forthcoming; instead, there are 'all those trappings devised to protect them from the indecent exposure of fear and pity, pity and fear'. Paradoxically, it's as if, however graphic the telling, the full effect of the story cannot be captured other than in a mediation (by the police, the media, the law courts, the forensic scientists) which automatically acts as a screen, a protective mechanism against and veil over the 'indecent exposure of fear and pity, pity and fear'. In a further, subtle and pernicious twist, Spark here merges two registers, the legalistic terminology of the sexual crime, with 'indecent exposure' on the same spectrum as 'rape', or indeed 'necrophilia', suggesting that the police too, like the public, may be victims in need of protection,

and the grander, intoned in poetic repetition allusion to Aristotle's definition of the tragic effect:

> Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions.[42]

In a formal sense, it may be said that Spark hatches an Aristotelian plot:[43] the action imitated in the novel is serious, of a certain magnitude and complete. As prescribed by Aristotle's definition, it involves 'recognitions' (as when Lise recognizes her man on the plane) and 'reversals' (twists, delays, wrong turnings, as Spark has Fleur Talbot say in *Loitering with Intent*: 'I dearly love a turn of events'),[44] and most importantly an end towards which all actions in the plot converge:

> For Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality. Now character determines men's qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse. Dramatic action, therefore, is not with a view to the representation of character: character comes in as subsidiary to the actions. Hence the incidents and the plot are the end of a tragedy; and the end is the chief thing of all.[45]

From that perspective, Lise, as character/heroine is only as significant as the result of her actions and her end.[46] In a sense, she is sacrificed for the plot, but she is, as we know, a willing victim, more than that – she literally drives her killer to 'it'. In that regard she resembles many other Sparkian heroines, all intensely, some painfully, others hilariously, aware of being women of destiny, like Lise, intent on reaching their destination.[47] As Alexandra, Abbess of Crewe, one of the most outrageous of such types proclaims,

> 'We are leaving the sphere of history and are about to enter that of mythology. Mythology is nothing more than history garbled; likewise history is mythology garbled and it is nothing more in all the history of man. […] Who doesn't yearn to be part of a myth at whatever the price in discomfort?'[48]

Arch-manipulator, the Abbess, is keenly aware of the power of a good story and to her mind (and Spark's), the old ones are the best:

> 'The more scandal there is from this point on the better. We are truly moving in a mythological context. We are the actors; the press and the public are the chorus. Every columnist has his own version of the same old story, as it were Aeschylus, Sophocles or Euripides, only of course, let me tell you, of a far inferior dramatic style'.[49]

An avid consumer of press reports, Spark found much by way of scandal to 'garble' into superior style. Like *The Abbess of Crewe* (1974) and *Not to Disturb* (1971), *The Driver's Seat* was 'inspired' by a contemporary newspaper story, as Martin Stannard

records,[50] yet the profile of its main character may have another 'real life' prototype, on whom Spark had already conferred certain telling features. In her early career as a critic and biographer, following *Child of Light* (1951), her 'reassessment' of Mary Shelley, Spark turned her attention to the Brontë sisters. She planned but never produced a biography and edition of Anne Brontë's works, edited a selection of Emily's verse (1952), the family's letters (1954), and in part-collaboration with Derek Stanford, the biographical study *Emily Brontë: Her Life and Work* (1953).[51] As she recalled in 1961, in a BBC television recording:

> For many years I was intensely occupied by Emily Brontë – almost haunted. What impressed me was the dramatic shape of her life. It's as if she had consciously laid out the plot of her life in a play called *Emily Brontë*. She might have been invented by Ibsen – a parson's daughter with a terrifying soul.[52]

Spark's fascination for the legend of 'Emily [Brontë]'s self-styled superwomanism'[53] seems to be one of the springboards for her manipulation of such an enigmatic heroine as Lise. What grabbed her attention as a reader of the Emily myth is revealing:

> Where Emily Brontë is concerned, the commonest fallacies held are those which attribute the qualities she acquired in the last three or four years of her life, to previous stages in her development. The result of this is that she seems to show no development. She is puzzle enough as it is, but invested with the

> right attributes at the wrong time it is no wonder that Mr Clement Shorter called her 'the sphinx of our modern literature'.[54]

For Spark, it was partly the work itself, and largely the perpetuation of an ending-bound dramatic shape to the life by impressionable biographers that created the Emily character:

> Emily Brontë was established as a legendary woman, first by those who had read her work, and next by people who had heard the legend. Villagers who remembered her, though seldom having spoken with her, obliged her first biographers by recounting this or that eccentricity. Legend-making is infectious.[55]

To mitigate that effect, Spark, undertook a different kind of 'experiment', as she put it, whereby '[a]ttention is given to the impressions Emily Brontë made on the people she met, particularly during her stay in Brussels, so that by comparing the reactions of her acquaintance, it is possible to deduce something of Emily's state of mind, even though we have no direct references to her feelings.'[56]

Having foregrounded her skepticism and determination to de-mystify Emily while retaining her 'essence', Spark grapples with the legend-making operation in persistent correctives; in the case of Emily's relationship to Anne, for instance, she finds that

> There seems to be an instinctive process of selection, whereby essential, if not literal truths attach themselves after a time to a reputation. So that the biographer

> who asserted of Emily in her earlier days that she showed pity and contempt for Anne cannot be ignored, only corrected. […] It is not a literal truth, of course, but the statement carries an essential truth: it may be interpreted to mean, 'Emily had it in her to show contempt and pity for Anne. Anne had it in her to evoke pity and contempt'. It is part of a biographer's business to show what the subjects had it in them to do and to be.[57]

The chiastic structure ('contempt and pity'/'pity and contempt'), a biblical and oratorical staple, is deployed here to different effect than at the ending of *The Driver's Seat*,[58] but some of its emphasis does carry over, in the context of another dramatic spectacle of the fortunes of a woman-puzzle. Earlier in the study, too, Spark's observations are couched in terms one might apply to the conundrums faced by a reader of Lise:

> Indeed, Emily Brontë seems to have been determined that her life should come under the category of 'uneventful'; not because she was apathetic about life, but on the contrary, because she was intensely taken up with her own particular calling in life. […] To the end, she caused very little to happen to herself by her own agency.[59]

The riddle of Emily's self-fashioned end, her legendary active passivity, is rendered by Spark as 'a distorted wish for life – a wish to be observed as an autonomous, powerful sufferer',[60] and warrants a critical close reading of Charlotte's account in a letter to Ellen Nussey:

> ‘I cannot forget Emily’s death-day. It becomes a more fixed, a darker, a more frequently recurring idea in my mind than ever. It was very terrible. She was torn, conscious, panting, reluctant, though resolute, out of a happy life’. […] What does she mean, ‘reluctant, though resolute’? We know Emily had been reluctant to cease her pain and to save her sisters’ grief, we know she had been resolute to avoid medical care and to endure a somewhat spectacular illness with stoicism. But at the moment of her death, for what was she reluctant – life or death? She was, it seems, reluctant for death. ‘Resolute’ suggests that she forced herself to die, against her natural instincts; almost that she could live or die at will. This is a prevalent theme in Emily Brontë comment; the implication that Emily’s illness and death were willed by her is frequent. This, no doubt, is what she herself wished to believe; but it was not so. Emily Brontë succeeded on the whole in conveying to posterity the idea that she was superhuman.[61]

The ‘reluctant and resolute’ oxymoron may echo too Lise’s ambivalent situation, as living on or living out her life as character is predicated on her determination to die. That is not to lend Lise agency, or flesh out her character through a life-writing register, which the novel so resolutely resists, but to underline Spark’s concern with the pitfalls of that very enterprise. For what is Lise but the sum of others’ impressions, her sightings, her identikit image?[62]

> Lise’s eyes are widely spaced, blue-grey and dull. Her lips are a straight line. She is neither good-looking nor bad-looking. Her nose is short and wider than it will look in the likeness constructed partly by the method of identikit, partly

> by actual photography, soon to be published in the newspapers of four languages.[63]

As this early passage suggests, all her traits are reconstructions, incomplete and inaccurate, and her ability to speak four languages, confirmed in the scene of her death, is but the effect of global circulation of sensationalist crime news stories. Lise, then, is quite literally a 'paper being',[64] at the very least the result of a joint storytelling effort, at most a legend. At the same time, it is the process of recognition by others with the kind of hindsight that drives fiction rather than fact which interests Spark, both as a critic and writer. In the account of her approach to Emily Brontë, she gives an insight into that fundamental operation:

> It happens from time to time that we meet someone; we don't catch his name; we note he is shy, or hearty, or dull; perhaps he has some mannerisms which irritate us; or he may leave the vaguest impression on us; or we may put him down as 'unusual'. Some weeks later, we learn 'who he is': someone we have heard about; whose books we have read; or whose piano recitals, which we have never attended, are famous. Returning to our impression of the man, we change it, though we may never see him again. The irritating mannerisms are quite understandable, they are charming. If he was too jovial, he now seems to have been surprisingly friendly. Shy, he is now modest. The vagueness of his features in our memory is illuminated by our new knowledge. We remember some strong quality, as befits genius. The first impression is obscured, unless we happen to have described him in a diary or a letter, on our meeting with him. Anyone comparing this impression with the later reconstruction of it,

> would scarcely recognize the same man in each. Which is the most accurate portrayal, that of the real man whom we chanced to meet, or that of our reconstruction – the legendary figure, in other words? The second impression is the more real. The first merely prefigured the legend. But the legend alone is not enough; we need concrete as well legendary impressions to bring us somewhere near a true picture of the man.[65]

And this is exactly what the Abbess of Crewe more punchily renders as 'garble', the necessary element, that wonderful scrambling effect of mis-interpretation, mis-recognition, what's lost (or found) in translation in the always complex communication between people, to which Spark's ear was so finely attuned, trained as she was in the interception and emission of wartime messages. The potential for 'garble' is endless and Spark's plots revel in it. It is in such a flawed way, then, that Lise's legend is both constructed and thwarted. We'll never know if she really intended to be raped as well as murdered, let alone *why* she wanted to be murdered in the first place. Spark may well have been aware of Charlotte Brontë's note of caution to those presuming to know:

> [I]t is not given to man or woman to read the heart of others: they can but conjecture – they can but infer – and whether the conjecture or inference be just God only knows. Even after an acquaintance of years – of a whole life – we may still be uncertain about the bearings of a character – we find in human nature such anomalies, such contradictions, such enigmas.[66]

Or it may be that, as John Glavin has noted, '[u]nlike the necromancer for whom knowledge is, finally, power, Muriel Spark does not impose her knowing on her invention. […] And her wit attends to but does not circumscribe her characters. She can claim with her heroine Fleur Talbot: "I don't go in for motives, I never have"'.[67] Yet, conditioned as readers to look for a motive, we grasp at any crudely psychological (or psychologisable) detail, making a meal of it as we go, attributing traits and filling in gaps to the best of our ability. We are told that Lise has been ill (though not how seriously) and we suspect that she's a spinster, or at least of unstained reputation. The little joke on that at the start of the novel, when Lise walks out of the shop in a 'how *very* dare you!' way after being offered an unstainable dress, should have taught us not to jump to conclusions. For consumers of thriller plots,[68] or scandalous news stories,[69] her insistence on a dress that stains becomes a major clue: why else would she want such a dress if not to make sure that the semen as well as the blood could be retrieved and used as evidence? In that sense, this is quite literally a 'necessary dress', and Lise 'looks for it' (both her own phrases) as if in the market for her own inscrutable *Ananke* ('necessity'), with Spark weaving punningly another Aristotelian thread into the novel's ethical veil.[70]

Outside the moral maze, however, the point remains that the text sets us traps as readers, and being true to type is one of them. In *The Mandelbaum Gate*, Barbara Vaughan experiences a frisson at the thought of being caught, of being seen through, as her boyfriend Harry Clegg, an archaeologist used to digging for remains, had seen through her spinster disguise. The reveal might still be a partial truth, but it would at least be a revolt against typecasting:

> Immediately on passing into the night air she realized that she had almost hoped to be caught, it would have been a relief and a kind of triumph and justification. For there had been a decided element of false assumption in her reception at the convent the previous day, after they had inquired politely, and estimated her type. Of course she was an English Catholic convert. She was indeed the quiet type. But there was a lot more than met the eye, at least she hoped so. […] She thought now, with the old exasperation, what right have they to take me at my face value? Every spinster should be assumed guilty before she is proved innocent, it is only common civility.[71]

This is clearly a persistent concern, and very close to home, as evidenced in Spark's bemused reflection from a 1996 'diary' entry:

> I don't know why it is, but even in these feminist days, there exists a body of ladylike reviewers (and perhaps readers, although I put in a query here) who feel that women writers should write novels of boring virtue. I have always marveled when people have described to me, either in fiction or in real life, a creature who 'hasn't a mean bone in her body,' or who is 'incapable of a mean thought.' Who are these freaks of the human race, and where? I have never met them and hope I never will, arch-hypocrites as they most certainly are. One product of an immaculate conception in the history of religion is surely enough.[72]

Circumnavigating its narrative detours and moral blind alleys, *The Driver's Seat* emplots the exact opposite of 'boring virtue', and bravely stains the reputation of the

female character-type. In the best possible sense, it is what Charlotte Brontë would call 'a rude and strange production'.[73]

Notes

[1] Muriel Spark, *Curriculum Vitae: Autobiography* [1992] (London: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 169.
[2] See respectively, Bryan Cheyette, *Muriel Spark* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2000), and Robert Ellis Hosmer Jr., 'The Chandeliers of the Metropole: A Vivid Glow Upon the Just and the Unjust in Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat*', *Scottish Literary Review* 9: 1 (2017), pp. 83-93, 91-92.
[3] Alan Bold, *Muriel Spark* (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), p. 50.
[4] Velma Bourgeois Richmond, 'The Darkening Vision of Muriel Spark', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 15: 1 (1973), pp. 71-85, 80.
[5] Ian Rankin, 'Surface and Structure: Reading Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat*', *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 15: 2 (1985), pp. 146-55.
[6] George Stade, 'A Whydunnit in Q-sharp Major', *The New York Times* 24 September 1970 [online] http://www.nytimes.com/books/01/03/11/specials/spark-seat.html [accessed 20 August 2018].
[7] Aidan Day, 'Parodying Postmodernism: Muriel Spark (*The Driver's Seat*) and Robbe-Grillet (*Jealousy*)', *English* 56: 216 (Autumn 2007), pp. 321-37.
[8] Jonathan Kemp, '"Her Lips Are Slightly Parted": The Ineffability of Erotic Sociality in Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat*', *Modern Fiction Studies* 54: 3 (2008), pp. 544-57, 546.
[9] Martha Duffy, 'A Whydunnit in Q-sharp Major', *Time* Monday 26 October 1970 http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,904446-1,00.html [accessed 20 August 2018].
[10] Martin Stannard, *Muriel Spark: The Biography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2009), p. 365.
[11] Rankin, 'Surface and Structure'; Allan Pero, '"Look for One thing and You Find Another": The Voice and Deduction in Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori*', *Modern Fiction Studies* 54: 3 (Fall 2008), pp. 558-73.
[12] Ian Gillham, 'Keeping It Short: Muriel Spark Talks about Her Books to Ian Gillham', *The Listener*, 24 September 1970, p. 412.
[13] Robert Hosmer, 'An Interview with Dame Muriel Spark', *Salmagundi* 146/147 (Spring 2005), pp. 127-58.

[14] Martin McQuillan, '"The Same Informed Air": An Interview with Muriel Spark', Martin McQuillan (ed.), *Theorising Muriel Spark: Gender, Race, Deconstruction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 228.
[15] Muriel Spark, *The Driver's Seat* [1970] (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974), p. 101.
[16] Kemp, '"Her Lips Are Slightly Parted": The Ineffability of Erotic Sociality in Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat*', p. 554.
[17] Spark, *The Driver's Seat*, pp. 9-10.
[18] Spark, *The Driver's Seat*, p. 101.
[19] Spark, *The Driver's Seat*, p. 9.
[20] Spark, *The Driver's Seat*, p. 104.
[21] Henry Staten's term for the projection of mortality and loss onto the eroticized body, from his *Eros in Mourning: Homer to Lacan* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. xii, 102, 165.
[22] Elaine Showalter, 'Rethinking the Seventies: Women Writers and Violence', *The Antioch Review*, 39: 2 (1981), pp. 156-70, p. 159.
[23] Spark, *The Driver's Seat*, p. 106.
[24] In this sense, Lise could be seen to be foreshadowing the claim made by Val, the radical feminist character in Marilyn French's feminist classic *The Women's Room* (1977): 'Whatever they may be in public life, whatever their relationships with men, in their relationships with women, all men are rapists, and that's all they are. They rape us with their eyes, their laws, and their codes'. Marilyn French, *The Women's Room* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1977), p. 462.
[25] See, for instance, Robert Ellis Hosmer Jr.'s reading: 'Lise is deluded, for she assumes a divine omniscience and omnipotence that can never be hers. Despite her meticulous planning of her own death, she fails, inevitably, at its perfect execution', 'The Chandeliers of the Metropole: A Vivid Glow Upon the Just and the Unjust in Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat*', p. 89.
[26] ' […] But Mousie, thou art no thy-lane, / In proving *foresight* may be vain: / The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men / Gang aft agley, / An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain, / For promis'd joy!'. Robert Burns, 'To a Mouse', in *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (Kilmarnock: John Wilson, 1786), p. 140.
[27] In *Identikit*, the 1974 film adaptation of the novel (aka *The Driver's Seat*), directed by Giuseppe Patroni Griffi, one of the frames in the park sequence features Lise (Elizabeth Taylor) as a moonlit silhouette standing in profile next to the distinctly phallic outline of a large tree. The lingering image evokes a pagan ritual with Lise as presiding priestess.
[28] Artistic representations of this difficult subject and their potentially conditioning force would interest Spark, a keen reader and manipulator of myth and folk tale. For instance, this conundrum conjures up the notorious last lines of W. B. Yeats's 'Leda and the Swan', a classic of the modern poetry canon, which Spark, as poet, anthologist and editor of the *Poetry Review*, would know all too well: '[…]
A shudder in the loins engenders there / The broken wall, the burning roof and tower / And Agamemnon dead. / Being so caught up, / So mastered by the brute blood of the air, / Did she put on his knowledge with his power / Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?' *Pace* Edward Said's strong anti-colonial reading of the poem in *Culture and Empire* (London: Vintage, 1994), pp. 265-88, critiques of its misogynist inflections include Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, '"Thinking of Her ... as ... Ireland": Yeats, Pearse and Heaney', *Textual Practice* 4: 1 (1990), pp. 1-21, and Sabina

Sharkey, 'Gendering Inequalities: The Case of Irish Women', *Paragraph* 16: 1 (1993), pp. 5-22.
[29] Spark, *The Girls of Slender Means* [1963] (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 44; emphasis added.
[30] For an account of such instances in a range of Spark's writing, see Vassiliki Kolocotroni, 'Poetic Perception in the Fiction of Muriel Spark', in Michael Gardiner and Willy Maley (eds), *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 16-26.
[31] Winston Churchill, Speech, House of Commons, May 7 1925. https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1925/may/07/new-import-duties [Accessed 20 August 2018].
[32] Spark, *The Driver's Seat*, p. 27.
[33] Spark, *Robinson* [1958] (New York: New Directions Classic, 2003), pp. 25-27.
[34] For a fine account of thematic and narrative affinities between *The Driver's Seat* and Duras's *The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein* (1966), which does not however mention *Moderato Cantabile*, see Judith Roof, 'The Future Perfect's Perfect Future: Spark's and Duras's Narrative Drive', in Martin McQuillan (ed.), *Theorizing Muriel Spark: Gender, Race, Deconstruction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 49-66.
[35] Spark, *The Mandelbaum Gate* [1965] (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 123.
[36] Spark, *The Hothouse by the East River* [1973] (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 61.
[37] Spark, *Doctors of Philosophy: A Play* [1963], in *Novelists' Theatre*, introduced by Eric Rhode (Middlesex: Penguin, 1966), p. 243.
[38] Spark, *Symposium* [1990] (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 112.
[39] Spark, *The Driver's Seat*, p. 107.
[40] Spark, *The Driver's Seat*, p. 50.
[41] Roof, 'The Future Perfect's Perfect Future: Spark's and Duras's Narrative Drive', pp. 60, 63.
[42] Aristotle, *Poetics*, VI, trans. S. H. Butcher, *The Internet Classics Archive* [online] http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.1.1.html, accessed 23 August 2018.
[43] Though as a bemused Franke Kermode found in his review of *The Driver's Seat*, 'this addendum can[not] convert the novella into a tragedy. It is less classifiable than *The Public Image*, and it seems that we are going to have to put up with an even sheerer Spark, a writer growing more and more parsimonious in the provision of interpretative hand-outs'. 'Sheerer Spark', *The Listener*, 24 September 1970, pp. 425-26.
[44] Spark, *Loitering with Intent* [1981] (London: Virago, 2007), p. 157.
[45] Aristotle, *Poetics*, VI.
[46] To paraphrase the title of Peter Brooks's classic study, Lise is 'Driving for the Plot'. As Brooks observes, 'The very possibility of meaning plotted through time depends on the anticipated structuring force of the ending: the interminable would be the meaningless. We read the incidents of narration as "promises and annunciations" of final coherence […] All narration is obituary in that life acquires definable meaning only at, and through, death'. See *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Knopf, 1984), p. 93.
[47] Though not all of them are victims: Lise's 'drive', however intentful, is quite emphatically unlike Fleur Talbot's, who states: 'I was not any sort of victim; I was simply not constituted for the role' (Spark, *Loitering with Intent*, p. 106).

[48] Spark, *The Abbess of Crewe* [1974] (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 87.
[49] Spark, *The Abbess of Crewe*, p. 19.
[50] Stannard notes that Spark was spending time in cafes scouring the newspapers for inspiration: 'Muriel's obsessive reading had concentrated on one story. A German woman, garishly dressed, had come to Rome and taken a stroll in the park. There she had been tied up, raped and stabbed to death. To Muriel, the compelling feature of this butchery was that the "victim" appeared to have provoked it. Here was the germ of her next novel'. Stannard, *Muriel Spark: The Biography*, pp. 363-64.
[51] Spark produced *The Essence of the Brontës*, a 'compilation' of her writings on Emily, along with a selection of the family letters, for Peter Owen in 1993. Her 'foreword' contains no mention of Derek Stanford.
[52] Spark, 'At Emily Brontë's Grave Haworth, April 1961: A BBC TV Recording', *The Essence of the Brontës: A Compilation with Essays* ([1993] Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2014), p. 314.
[53] Spark, 'Emily Brontë: Her Life', *The Essence of the Brontës*, p. 259.
[54] Spark, 'Emily Brontë: Her Life', p. 199.
[55] Spark, 'Emily Brontë: Her Life', p. 198.
[56] Spark, 'Emily Brontë: Her Life', p. 199.
[57] Spark, 'Emily Brontë: Her Life', p. 255.
[58] And differently again elsewhere in her work. See, for instance the recording of Churchill's 'Sinaitic predictions of what fate would befall the freedom-loving electorate should it vote for Labour in the forthcoming elections' in *The Girls of Slender Means*: '"We shall have Civil Servants …" The wirelesses changed their tones, they roared: "No longer civil…" Then they were sad and slow: "No longer… … *servants*", pp. 86-7.
[59] Spark, 'Emily Brontë: Her Life', p. 192.
[60] Spark, 'Emily Brontë: Her Life', p. 256.
[61] Spark, 'Emily Brontë: Her Life', pp. 255-56.
[62] The device of the compound character identifiable only through sightings, impressions and police identikits also appears in *Aiding and Abetting*, another Sparkian 'garble' of the sensational press story of Lord Lucan's crime and disappearance. Lucan is, like Lise, 'a name in the newspapers', *Aiding and Abetting* ([2000]Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001), p. 63. Another 'whydunnit in q-sharp major', this was one of Spark's favourite works – as she put it to Martin McQuillan, 'I have a special weakness, too, for my new novel *Aiding and Abetting*', Martin McQuillan, '"The Same Informed Air": An Interview with Muriel Spark', p. 228.
[63] Spark, *The Driver's Seat*, p. 18.
[64] I am borrowing Roland Barthes's phrase from his critique of realist conceptions of character: 'Now, at least from our viewpoint, both narrator and characters are essentially "paper beings"'. 'An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative', *New Literary History* 6: 2 (Winter 1975), p. 261.
[65] Spark, 'Emily Brontë: Her Life', p. 196.
[66] Letter to Amelia Taylor, *née* Ringrose, 2 April 1850, *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë, Volume Two 1848-1851*, ed. Margaret Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), p. 373. The letter is not included in Spark's selection for *The Brontë Letters* (1954), which as she recorded in the Foreword to the 1993 compilation, 'ha[d] been chosen with the express intention of presenting a "Brontë autobiography"', *The Essence of the Brontës*, p. 7.

[67] John Glavin, 'Muriel Spark's *Unknowing* Fiction', *Women's Studies* 15 (1988), pp. 221-41, pp. 235-36.
[68] For an account of Spark's *nouveau-romanesque* manipulation of the detective plot in the novel, see Maria Vara, 'The Victim and Her Plots: The Function of the Overpowering Victim in Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat*', *Gramma* 9 (2001), pp. 139-155. For a discussion of Spark's parodic treatment of detective fiction as a form of 'high burlesque', see Serkan Ertin, 'Muriel Spark's Employment of Burlesque: Parody of Detective Fiction in *Not to Disturb*', *Lublin Studies in Modern Languages and Literature* 41: 1 (2017), pp. 65-72.
[69] The Lewinsky-Clinton affair springs to mind. See Jenni Sorkin, 'Stain: On Cloth, Stigma, and Shame', *Third Text* 14, 53 (2000): 77-80. According to Sorkin: 'In the 1990s, no garment was more ill-famed than White House intern Monica Lewinsky's navy blue dress, marked with Bill Clinton's semen. But what of the other stain? That which is not self-originated, that which is incurred by outside action or force. Not from my own behaviour, or of my own body. That which I did not will, choose, nor want. That which is inflicted by another. That which is forced. Stain becomes, then, both an enactment and vestige of degradation, violence and coercion' (79).
[70] On Aristotle's treatment of necessity in matters of moral responsibility in voluntary and involuntary actions, see, for instance, Andre Santos Campos, 'Responsibility and Justice in Aristotle's Non-Voluntary and Mixed Actions', *Journal of Ancient Philosophy* 7: 2 (2013), pp. 100-121.
[71] Spark, *The Mandelbaum Gate*, p. 152.
[72] Spark, 'Dame Muriel Spark: Diary 10-14 December 1996', *Slate* http://www.slate.com/id/3705/ Accessed 20 August 2018.
[73] Quoted by Spark in the BBC TV recording: '"To those who don't know the out-lying parts of the West Riding", [Charlotte] said, "[*Wuthering Heights*] must appear a rude and strange production"'. *The Essence of the Brontës*, p. 316.